

Kelowna

Snow-free winter leading to water woes

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By Kathy Michaels

What's looking like one of the drier winters in recent memory has water wonks readying themselves for another stressful year.

"The concerns have to do with the precipitation we have this year and trying to catch up for last year," said Anna Warwick Sears of the Okanagan Basin Water Board.

Supplies are already being taxed and last year's conditions offered parts of the Valley a taste of what's to come.

"We only got about 67 per cent of our normal reserves, which we rely on," said Toby Pike, general manager of the South East Kelowna Irrigation District.

That shortfall forced them into stage two water restrictions which meant their predominantly farmer-based clientele had to cut back to 80 per cent of their water allotment. Something Pike noted was particularly tough on orchardists who have already been struggling to make ends meet, though he's heard no reports of tree casualties.

What's worse is that so far, this year isn't looking much better.

"Right now we have 80 per cent of what would be normal this time of year...we are a little light going into summer, so we're monitoring and considering what actions we will have to take," he said.

"Everybody has been concerned. Westbank was on stage two restrictions last year, and the Greater Vernon Water District has looked at their snowpack and are already wondering if they will have to implement restrictions."

While it doesn't appear as though the valley will be flush with H2O by the time summer rolls around, Pike said one can never tell and all it takes to turn things around is a few good dumps of rain and snow.

Pike isn't in the business of speculating, but Environment Canada does set out long-range forecasts for precipitation and meteorologist Doug Lundquist pointed to a particularly brown future when asked what's to come.

"In the next two months there's an 80 per cent chance that it will be drier than normal," said Lundquist.

"That said, the long range forecast reliability is weak, we only need one rainy month and that can help to wet things up."

While Lundquist is optimistic, Pike pointed out that the Farmer's Almanac has presented a similarly dry view of the months to come, though "hopefully, they're wrong."



Mission Creek is reduced to a trickle beneath snow and ice.

The (Photo Chris Stanford)

If not, the Okanagan Basin Water Board is working on a Valley-wide drought action plan that will offer ways for varying bodies of government to adapt what's looking to be a regular occurrence.

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